

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

May 17th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

In a recent News-Letter about the resistance movement in France we saw the forces of life and adventure at deadly grips with those of disintegration and death. On the one side the passion for justice and freedom, sublime courage and selfless devotion, a new sense of solidarity and comradeship in the endurance of hardship and trial; on the other side, the inevitable sacrifice of certain values, leaving, as M. Vallé pointed out in his broadcast talk that was quoted, the awful problem of creating a civilized democratic community out of those who in the service of a good cause had made themselves outlaws.

THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

I have had a letter from an eminent Frenchman now in this country commenting on what was said in the News-Letter. Intellectual difficulties have led him to sever his connection with the Christian Church, but he retains a profound understanding of the religious and moral issues at stake. This is what he writes:—

"The young Frenchman's broadcast as you quote it is very moving. It is absolutely true. I myself had the same kind of experience when I was fleeing from the Gestapo with them hot on my trail. The fact is that you save your life, but not the truth that is in you. You live in an atmosphere of deceit and falsehood. And that is not a small part of the ordeal that one must undergo. And what a lot of Frenchmen, civil servants, magistrates, teachers and others have been driven to act against their innermost conscience. A friend of mine, one of my colleagues, asked a magistrate one day how it came about that his son, who was a patriot, had been arrested on the charge of 'conspiring against the national interest.' The magistrate, in presence of this father who was speaking to him of the arm he had lost in the first world war, replied: 'Fundamentally I agree with you, and it makes me angry. But I am obliged to fulfil the obligations of my office.' This is one of the most terrible aspects of a regime like that of Vichy.

"It is quite true that a large number of Catholics and Protestants in France take part in the resistance movement. A good proportion of the Protestant middle class has rebelled against Vichy, the policy of collaboration and German oppression. One can say the same of Catholicism, and also of secular free thought founded on practical morality and having its own greatness and strength. I have never heard of Christians in France refusing to join the resistance movement in order to avoid the compromises we are discussing. As regards the duty to resist, as you define it in your News-Letter, most of those taking part in the movement have not a shadow of doubt about it.

The command is absolute ; it is carried out in a relative sphere. And I like it when you say : ' Abstention or renunciation is worse than the inevitable compromise in this realm.' I would not myself have recourse to a solution similar to Miss Emmet's, interesting and profound though it is, any more than to that of ordinary morality. I would rather gather up my thought in the idea of trial or proof. For the real significance of the testings to which life exposes us are perhaps its greatest mystery. And here I would say with you that ' we have often to act in what seems *like the dark.*' That's just it. And I am struck by what you say on p. 5, that ' in the Christian view God meets us also in the *circumstances* of our lives, which are His appointment.' I believe that many great men, though not practising Christians in the ecclesiastical sense of the term, have understood and felt this. A Shakespeare, a Goethe, have, like Calvin, had this great and profound understanding of being put to the proof. In his last plays especially—I am thinking of *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*—the genius of Shakespeare has revealed the depth of meaning in the *ordeal* of life.

" You do not define the moral order carefully, principle by principle. You believe in it. And there is something profound in Friedrich Hebbel's phrase, ' self-correction of the world,' even though the world does not right itself and though divine correction only intervenes through the almost ' superhuman ' effort of men. What is happening to-day under our very eyes is clear proof of this. And inescapable punishment follows on the violation of the moral order carried out by Hitlerite Germany, though this violation was in part made possible by the weakness of the nations whose duty it was to declare and uphold the moral order. There is a great crisis of values—of the humanities, of Christianity, of liberalism, of socialism, of all that concerns beauty, love, liberty and justice—values which are in themselves eternal. Everything has been questioned anew. And the problem of the immediate future is how to restore humanism, the sole foundation of the international order so deliberately and painstakingly destroyed by Germany."

THE SUPPLEMENT ON THE MINERS

The recent Supplement about the miners has provoked a considerable correspondence, revealing, on this as on most subjects with which we deal, diametrically opposed views.

A representative of a group of colliery proprietors writes that the Supplement contains a number of statements that are highly controversial, and that none of his principals " would subscribe for a moment to the conditions mentioned in the third paragraph of the Supplement, which they think gives an entirely wrong impression." A leading mine-owner says in a letter : " Harry Brown brings forward many indictments, some of them quite beside the mark. I could bring just as many against the miners and their leaders. All these added together form an indictment against the whole industry, and that is what we want to remedy." There have been a number of other letters to the same effect.

We never supposed that a single Supplement could present the whole truth about so complex a situation as that in the mining industry.

While important human values, about which Christians ought to feel a deep concern, are involved, the questions in dispute include such a wide range of diverse facts and conflicting considerations that we do not believe that there is any specifically Christian solution of the difficulties. The question with which the Supplement was primarily concerned was the attitude of the mining community to Christianity, and this question can be rightly understood only against the background of their total experience as seen and understood by themselves.

A number of our members have recognized that this was the purpose of the Supplement and have written to express gratitude for its publication. The following letter from the Warden of a Social Service Centre in a mining area is a sample :—

“I have exceptional opportunities for hearing the point of view of miners. When I read that article I felt deeply thankful, because it seemed to sum up all the points which I had gleaned from conversation with my many friends here. I read the article aloud to two of them the other day, and they said they could endorse every word. They are young men, brought up as Christians, but who have slipped away from the Church through distrust and suspicion of everything and everybody, due to the circumstances outlined in the Supplement. They were really heartened, almost thrilled, by the Supplement. Here at last was their case put fairly and with understanding before people who cared to know the truth. They would like to have a copy or two to show their comrades ‘down there.’

“How often I wish that clergy and ministers of the Church could get more into touch with these men, who look wistfully to Christianity in spite of their cynicism about the Church. Nothing but the Christian religion can bring them out of their hopelessness and self-conscious lack of confidence, but only evidence of very real Christianity will be able to touch and release their imprisoned wills.”

RE-ENFORCEMENT

It has been evident for some time from reports and letters that have reached us that a major task confronting the Churches, and exercising at the present time the minds of many chaplains in the Services, is that of creating the right links between the Churches and the men and women who have come under religious influences while serving with the Forces, when they are demobilized after the war. This is only one aspect of the wider problem of building new bridges between organized religion and the great majority of the population for whom, as experience in the Forces has shown, Christian teaching has no living meaning or effective challenge.

With the approval of the British Council of Churches the Council of the Christian Frontier have appointed the Rev. Kenneth Mathews to explore this whole question in consultation with those who have it at heart.

After taking his degree at Balliol College, Oxford, about fifteen years ago, Kenneth Mathews became personal secretary to Tubby Clayton of Toc H. He then worked his way out to Australia as a deck

boy, and went on round the world, putting in a spell as a labourer on a sheep run in New Zealand. After ordination he was for two years a curate in a distressed area in the West Riding, and then for three years chaplain and welfare officer to an oil tanker fleet, spending all of his time at sea. He then became Vicar of Forest Row, and soon after the outbreak of the war joined the Royal Navy as chaplain and served for four years in H.M.S. *Norfolk*. He was present at the sinking both of the *Bismarck* and of the *Scharnhorst*. He was made O.B.E. in 1942 and, following the *Scharnhorst* action, was awarded the D.S.C. In his varied experiences he has obtained an unusual knowledge of men.

The Christian Frontier has no intention of bringing into existence any new organization. What requires to be done to meet the needs which Mr. Mathews will explore must plainly be done by the Churches themselves and by other existing agencies. But it is obvious that better plans can be made if the right man is available to give his undivided attention to the problem and to bring into consultation all the parties interested, so that the task with its many and varied demands and possibilities can be viewed as a whole. We believe that Kenneth Mathews is the right man, and this opinion is confirmed by those who know him and the work he has already done.

The cost of this experiment for a year, including office accommodation, secretarial help and travel as well as salary will amount to about £1,000. We hope that readers of the Christian News-Letter will help us to secure this. One of our members sent us a few weeks ago a small donation for our funds and said that if there was need she would be willing to give more. We told her of the proposed appointment and received by return of post a cheque for £150. We shall welcome contributions, small or large. We have only once before made a direct appeal to our members for financial help, when you sent us more than £500 to meet the doubling of the cost of postage in the early days of the war. But if the work of the Christian Frontier is to expand, as we hope it may do rapidly as soon as the war is over, we shall need to enlarge the circle of those who contribute to its funds. If gifts are received in excess of the sum named, they will be available for further extensions of the work.

THE SUPPLEMENT

The writer of the Supplement is the Director of the Religious Drama Society. His experience of his subject is unique. He was the first director of religious drama, being appointed by the Bishop of Chichester in 1930. He produced all Mr. T. S. Eliot's religious plays, and in 1939 founded the Pilgrim Players.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. Deane

DRAMA AS THE EXPRESSION OF RELIGION

By E. MARTIN BROWNE

Drama has always been the most fascinating of the arts. To the term "stage-struck" there has been no parallel such as "sculpture-silly" or "painting-potty": and the word "fan," which I take to be an abbreviation of "fanatic," has sprung from stage (and film) usage. The reason for this peculiar attraction is that the material used by the actor is himself—his own body and mind, and in some degree also his own spirit. So he is fascinating: but for the same reason he is also despicable. He is a pretender, who in one sense cannot call his soul his own, and sometimes does not want so to call it. Shakespeare, a man of the theatre whose heart was not in it, describes the

"poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage," and to the law of Shakespeare's time he was a rogue and a vagabond. This aspect of the actor is underlined by puritanism in all ages: and it is a true enough aspect, for the actor is in a sense a doubly fallen creature, he nightly takes upon him the nature of a fellow-creature fallen like himself and subject to sin and death. Nothing, indeed, dies more swiftly than the actor's impersonation. No stone nor canvas remain to preserve the life of his creation. It passes as a breath. Yet this, the most ephemeral of the arts, is also the longest-lived of them all.

THE ACTOR IN HISTORY

Acting, in our familiar sense, was originally part of a religious festival. The Greeks, who originated it in Europe, kept it linked with religion, and their study of man through the medium of the actor was a study always in religious terms. In Rome it fell far from its high estate: but its real nature, though hidden, was not lost.

With the drama of the stage the first Christian Church had no link. It was a pagan entertainment, fallen from artistic as well as from moral grace, and often part of the same Roman holiday with Christian martyrdoms. The actor had accepted the Fall which he portrayed. It took the Church hundreds of years to build her own drama, and to find her own actors in the Christian community. In the mystery-plays the Faith was presented for and by the people: wedded with the surviving professional troupes, these actors produced the theatre of Shakespeare. But the seeds of division were already sown in it: once more the stage was outcast by the puritans, and the actor divorced from the Faith.

Not only the actor suffered. The anti-dramatic tendency which operated against him also attempted to conceal the drama of the Eucharist and in fact weakened the Church's doctrine of God's Drama, the Incarnation itself, in the minds of ordinary men. To the average Christian in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, God was not directly involved in human life, and religion was a special sabbath-day activity. This tendency has worked itself down to its nadir, and recovery is beginning. The revival of Christian drama is one of its symptoms and one of the channels of its working.

THE NEW CHRISTIAN DRAMA

The new Christian drama, like the old, springs from the people. The first modern religious plays of which I have knowledge appeared in parishes scattered about England. In my travels I come occasionally to a place where they tell me: "We were doing plays in or by the church twenty, thirty, even forty years ago." Now a large number of Christian churches in Britain have dramatic groups attached to them, and many do religious plays linked with the church's worship. This development is, from one aspect, a part of the colossal growth of amateur drama. I saw an estimate some years ago that there were 100,000 amateur actors in England: and I am sure that this is now very far short of the truth. Into the reasons for that we must not enter at length, though some of them operate upon the religious drama as well as upon the secular. I take it that the chief ones are the desire for self-expression as a contrast to the increasing regimentation of life, and the desire for creation to counteract the effect of mechanical toil.

The amateur drama, at any rate, is with us in force: and many a church is using it to set forth the Christian story. There is always a nativity play: quite often a passion play, scenes from the life of the patron saint, missionary tableaux or plays, children's productions. A few churches have drama guilds, whose biennial or triennial productions draw the whole neighbourhood; but most do not seek to do more than purely parochial work.

LIMITATIONS

The level reached by this drama is, frankly, a low one. It compares ill with the secular work produced under parallel conditions. Some of its promoters excuse this low standard on the grounds that it is for home consumption only and that its chief benefit is to the performers. It is a pity that performances which, according to this argument, should be ranked with the drama done in the classroom as a means of school study, are sometimes presented as public shows and even advertised outside the circle of the performers' friends and relations. No good service is done to the Faith by

ignoring the distinction between dramatic performance and educational practice.

But leaving aside this type of work, why is the standard of the amateur religious drama lower than that of the secular? On the average just as much care is taken over it; the promoters are even more serious in intention; the subject with which it deals is the most completely dramatic of all subjects. The most obvious reason is that in various respects it lacks resources. To take the least important first, there is less money. Like all "side-lines" of the church, it tends to be done "on the cheap"; the church funds cannot be drawn upon to meet expenses, and in fact hope to benefit from the takings. The treasurer does not regard the drama as an essential, but as a luxury.

Poverty, however, is not always a handicap: it may act as a spur to the imagination. More cramping is the limited choice of actors. Believing Christians, we know, are now but a small percentage of the community: and from them most of the casts must be drawn. Corresponding, and even more serious, is the paucity of producers. Both these troubles might be eased by the provision of training, such as the Drama Schools give in many counties and through the British Drama League, for those who are trying to carry on the work. The Trusts who have assisted this cannot provide it for specifically religious drama. A little help would go a long way towards making the best use of the personnel available.

Worst of all is the dearth of dramatists. The number of Christian writers who can turn out a first-class play can be counted on the fingers of two hands. Until recently, most of our plays were the work either of authors deriving their methods from the theatre of yesterday or of amateur dramatists who wrote without experience for local consumption. The work of such writers seldom stands transplantation from the parish stage into cold print, and is seldom useful except for the cast for which it was made. The growth of slightly larger producing units has given a few dramatists the chance to improve by experience: but even these units are not adequate workshops for the training of worthy writers.

THE PURPOSE OF RELIGIOUS DRAMA

Besides these reasons for the inadequacy of most Christian drama, there is another of a different kind. Its practitioners suffer from confusion of thought, born of the afore-mentioned divorce of the actor from the Faith, upon the nature and purpose of what they are trying to do. The first is exemplified in the frequent commendation of drama as "a teaching medium." This usually means that the play is to instruct its cast and its audience in the facts of the Bible narrative, and that the characters are to be mouthpieces expounding its significance. The performance that results consists

of pious platitudes delivered in pious attitudes. The actors are afraid to believe themselves real people—in other words, to *act* at all—and in fact tend to avoid using their imaginations on their characters. We need to re-establish, in the minds of all who have to do with it, that drama is not an exposition but an experience: that the play exists to enable actors and audience together to become part of the divine essence for a revealing moment.

The other common confusion is about what makes a play religious. This can broadly be stated in the question: Is a play about a religious subject always a religious play? There have been plays (and films) enough which make capital of the special appeal of biblical and other religious subjects while avoiding all their religious implications. These are not in the true sense religious plays. On the other hand, the barrier which we who are concerned with religious plays tend to set up between them and secular plays is also a false one. Christian thought, and therefore Christian drama, should cover the whole of life: we should welcome plays on every subject treated from the Christian point of view: we should not try to tie our dramatists down to "religious subjects," but should support them in writing on every aspect of life.

I have said some hard things about the standard of amateur Christian drama. But against them must be set one over-riding good. In this drama, actor and audience are one. Nowhere else, except perhaps in the drama of the Left, is this fundamental condition of true drama fulfilled. The weakening of our modern theatre has come most of all from the decline of faith: actor and audience have no common philosophy of life. Hence the theatre's tendency to run away from everything big: instead of being "larger than life," to seek an ever more microscopic naturalism. But in Christian drama, however woodenly and hesitatingly, the actor presents life in its fullness, because he is on common grounds with his audience, both agreeing to accept Christ Jesus as their God. This is the secret of the deep and long-remembered impression often produced even by the crudest of religious plays, and the justification of the efforts of those who present them.

LANDMARKS IN THE REVIVAL

The revival of which we are speaking is still very young in years; it is, so to speak, a "leggy" child which has somewhat outgrown its strength both artistically and theologically. But it has produced some work of absolutely good quality, most of it with the help of sympathetic men and women of the professional theatre. Certain of its productions, indeed, have brought into that theatre a new audience, who have quite startled its managers, both by their numbers and by their behaviour. It may be worth while briefly to enumerate some landmarks in the revival's progress.

In the early days of this century there began the re-representation of the mediaeval Mysteries, mostly by William Poel and by Nugent Monck, who, at first even suffering prosecution for his pains, has steadfastly continued to revive the drama of our Age of Faith. The late Lilian Baylis, whose faith invaded her theatre in full force ("Go home, dear, and pray to give a better performance to-morrow," she said to an actor), brought "Everyman" to the Old Vic each Lent. The value of the old plays lies in their acceptance of the Faith as permeating all life, so that their characters are fully human beings. We are spurred by them to present our own life as completely in Christian terms: for though we shall never wish to give up reviving the old Mysteries, we must make our contemporary Mysteries too.

The pioneer in that creation has been the present Bishop of Chichester. As Dean of Canterbury, he invited Masefield, Holst and Ricketts to make a drama for the Cathedral, and the result was "The Coming of Christ" (Whitsuntide, 1928). Moving to Chichester next year, he appointed the first Director of Religious Drama for his diocese. This post covered both the provision of a travelling company doing pioneer work and plays of the subtler types, and also the supervision and assistance of parish work. Similar appointments have been made in other dioceses, and in others again the work is done by a committee. Christian unity has been promoted by drawing several churches into the work.

The Religious Drama Society, of which the Bishop is President, has from the first been an inter-denominational body. Starting from small beginnings, it is gradually co-ordinating the hundreds of play-promoters throughout the country and indeed throughout the Empire, to their mutual advantage. Its two chief functions so far have been to provide advice and library for producers and to organize audiences and opinion. In peace time it held schools and conferences. During the war it has sponsored the Pilgrim Players. After the war it can become the body through which the position of drama in the work of the churches is established.

One more achievement largely due to the Bishop of Chichester was the Canterbury Festival. In 1930 the newly-formed Friends of Canterbury Cathedral held the first Festival of the Arts in and around the mother church of England. The drama was represented by Tennyson's "Becket," played by a cast combining local amateurs with eminent professional players. The Friends soon adopted the policy of inviting a poet to write a new play each year, and the first of these was T. S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral." Its author had just written the words of "The Rock," a pageant-play whose choruses had stated the condition of London in a verse so trenchant and witty as to startle and delight Sadlers Wells audiences. The play of Becket was his first original drama. Its position as a

masterpiece is already assured, and no more need be said of it here. Charles Williams followed with "Cranmer," Christopher Hassall with "Christ's Comet," and Dorothy Sayers with two plays. Even in these few years, a little band of outstanding writers has thus appeared, and it is remarkable that each has an entirely distinctive style. No secular Festival of a similar kind can show more vitality or originality in its dramatists than Canterbury. Miss Sayers has followed "The Zeal of Thy House" and "The Devil to Pay" with a series of broadcast plays which are having a profound influence both upon their hearers and upon the whole method of presenting religion through the microphone.

The Festivals at Canterbury, as at Tewkesbury, and other places where the lead was being followed, were interrupted in 1939; but the work of religious drama was not. The first of all the companies formed to take the drama to the people were the Pilgrim Players. Since November, 1939, they have toured Britain from the Orkneys to Penzance, and in well over two thousand performances have given plays almost exclusively religious to every variety of audience, service and civilian, young and old, ecclesiastical and secular. Their adventures would make a book by themselves: here it need only be said that the quality and the wide dissemination of their work have made the drama of religion acceptable to the people of this island as never before. CEMA associated the Pilgrims with itself in its earliest days, and this association, helpful, happy and of inestimable importance for the future, has continued ever since.

THE FUTURE

I have tried to sketch, necessarily with many omissions, the history of the revival of religious drama. It is taking its place as a principal means of conveying the experience and the meaning of the Christian faith. The revival has occurred in the course of a very few years, and I believe that its full power has not yet been reached. What are the possibilities for its future?

First, from the point of view of the Christian churches. They have hitherto regarded drama as an "extra": some of them have thought it more important than others, but none has treated it as an integral part of the Church's work. This phase, I believe, is now ending. Drama, as we have seen, is widely used in and by individual congregations, and is attracting quite a large number of people who are not regular attenders. If it is to express religion with full power and in proper form, the Christian Body as a whole should link drama closely with the best of its thought and worship, and give to its development assured and active support.

How can this support be given? Here are one or two suggestions. A suitable body—either the present Religious Drama Society, which has the necessary experience, or a new body formed for the

purpose—should be given the authority of the churches and the task of advising and co-ordinating the work that is already being done. Regional branches would be formed. Local groups would be brought together to their mutual benefit: schools, advisory visits, libraries, wardrobes could be organized, large-scale productions occasionally undertaken. Each district, drawing upon the best talent of all Christians in its area, would be able to create its distinctive expression of its faith, and English Christianity be enriched thereby. Experiments of this kind are being tried in a few places and have great value; but they will remain precarious, dependent upon a few vigorous individuals, unless they can be related to a strong central body well financed and supported, so that the contribution of each is used to the full benefit of all.

In any large city, a redundant church-building could be devoted to drama. Capital would be needed, and at least a paid producer, to ensure that this place, on which critical eyes would be fixed, should do work worthy of its dedication. Here would be a workshop for the promising dramatists (and there are not a few) whose growth is being stunted for lack of a stage. Here would be the training-ground for the young people who ask to make religious drama their life-work: among them a community life might well prove possible. Here would be the place of schooling which the parish producer so eagerly seeks, at present almost in vain. Here would be a stimulus to the Christian thought of the district and a centre of its spiritual life, with the opportunity to experiment in the relationship between drama and public worship.

For an alliance between these two is overdue. The mediaeval drama was born within the liturgy, and some of its finest examples are completely liturgical in style. Our idea of drama is so naturalistic that we find it hard to think once more in these terms: but when a play so conceived comes to us—Gheon's "The Way of the Cross," for instance—we get a glimpse of a new medium: worship-drama. Experiments have been conducted from the liturgical end (at Liverpool Cathedral, for example) as well as from the dramatic, but both are still feeling their way. The two sets of workers should be brought together in the drama-church. That our people are ready, the response to the drama of the Coronation is sufficient proof.

This is one of the ways in which drama can do the work of religious education. Through the decline in church attendance and the changes in our language, the set forms of Christian worship have become alien to the vast majority of our people. If they are brought to church, the strangeness of the service often drives them away again. Drama, rightly used, can act as a bridge leading to regular worship. It can also be of great value in schools. Many are already so using it, both welcoming professional companies and also creating their own plays. The work of Mona Swann and of the Caldecott

Community may be cited as signposts on this road. In youth organizations a great demand is growing: very little drama has yet appeared to meet it, but Rodney Bennett on the smaller scale, and the GFS Pageant "Thursday's Child" on the larger, provide examples.

A Religious Drama Church or Centre could do much good work in these fields. Such a centre might from its regular players also provide the "task forces" needed for missionary work. Some local groups are already doing this: during or after Religion and Life Weeks, for instance, they are putting on special plays. The Pilgrim Players receive requests for the same service. Such a job, to be well done, needs a company with a firm policy and a centre where it can re-create its drama: for the presentation of the Faith must be ever fresh, both in manner and in spirit. Similar demands will come on a large scale with the great church-building programmes that will follow the peace. The presentation of the relationship of the Christian gospel to society as it affects our own future can be done better through drama than in any other way. The scope is huge. The chance is unique. The moment is now.

For the religious drama is fuller of life at this moment than ever before. It has won the respect of the theatre as well as of the church. There is still plenty of prejudice to overcome, and there are many managers who would not consider a religious play for their theatres. But there is plenty of goodwill among many leading members of the profession and the public. Any religious play of the first rank could now emulate the success of "Murder in the Cathedral." It is possible that the national and civic theatres, which are coming at long last to this country, may reckon religion among the themes with which their plays should deal. The churches should support with all their might the formation of such theatres. Not ten per cent of our people had, until the war, ever seen a play. That is an experience which many of them have discovered in these years of war, and which all of them need.

The church and the stage can thus come together again, for the benefit of both. The presentation of Christian truth on the stage can be made at each level of achievement, from parish hall to national theatre, from village church to cathedral, the best and most complete.

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